Gangs, Netwar, and "Community Counterinsurgency" in Haiti

BY DAVID C. BECKER

After his tumultuous on-again/off-again administration, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's sudden departure from Haiti in 2004 left the country in chaos. The economy was in shambles, tourism and investment had flatlined, and an armed band marched on the capital with the support of large parts of the population. Other elements of the population violently protested Aristide's departure while looting what they could. While the Haitian government always was most notable for its absence, Aristide managed to politicize the police force while reducing it to a fraction of its original size. Society was more polarized than ever.

Early on, Aristide resorted to distributing weapons to youth groups (known as *bazes* or bases) in exchange for their support.[1] Weapons provided to defend Aristide also gave the groups the where-withal to commit crimes and dominate neighborhoods. With his departure, these gangs (which at that point were fully involved in criminal activity) quickly established control over parts of Port-au-Prince and zones in other cities such as Cap Haïtien, Gonaïves, and Jacmel. Even as late as 2006, 2 years after the arrival of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), there were still several recognized zones (mostly slums or low-income neighborhoods) scattered around the country where the government was not present and was actively resisted.

The situation was volatile, and the continued inability of the government or the United Nations (UN) to establish more than nominal stability in many urban neighborhoods left open the question of who was really in charge. Violent crimes and kidnappings were increasing precipitously in 2006, despite

efforts of the international community to rebuild the police and the use of UN forces to patrol the streets. The problem was not that criminal gangs were so strong but rather that the Haitian state was so fragile. After years of chaos and upheaval, in many parts of the country there were virtually no government representatives and certainly no government services.

No international intervention succeeds unless a legitimate government is restored to the point that it can provide real services, especially security. If not, both state and people will remain hostage to those political or criminal forces willing to use violence to achieve their ends. Likewise, organized criminal groups, just like insurgencies, may appropriate functions of the state, de facto replacing it in peripheral and even central cities, towns, and neighborhoods. While the problem may be a "sovereignty gap"[2] where the state is not present, the question is how best to fix it.

Haiti Stabilization Initiative and Cité Soleil

The Haiti Stabilization Initiative (HSI) was a multiagency U.S. effort to bring security and economic improvements to some of the most difficult and dangerous neighborhoods in Port-au-Prince. An unusual effort from the beginning, HSI was the first proposed use of funding provided by the Department of Defense (DOD) under Section 1207 of the Defense Authorization Act of 2007, permitting transfer of military funds to the Department of State for projects that would help in stabilization, with a goal of preventing (expensive) DOD interventions in the future. One advantage was that HSI funds were not tied or stovepiped to any one agency, and the State Department's Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization designed a program with a full range of interventions across

security, development, rule of law, infrastructure, and government sectors. An additional unique improvement was that State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) assigned staff dedicated to the program rather than adding the program as collateral duties to existing portfolios. This staff was present for virtually the entire 3-year program, critical to understanding the environment and analyzing and reanalyzing results.

HSI required a number of compromises from the outset. A budget cut from \$85 to \$20 million in 2006 meant rescaling the project downward. Rather than spreading funding across several sites, planners made a decision to focus on Cité Soleil, on the edge of Port-au-Prince, as the hardest of the hard targets and a hot spot of rapidly growing notoriety inside and outside Haiti. A vast shantytown of mostly informal housing and businesses with an estimated population of 300,000 or more, Cité Soleil represented 10 percent of the entire urban population of the national capital.

Not only was state presence nonexistent in Cité Soleil, but also public authorities that had been present were considered illegitimate. The police who had worked there up until 2003 were widely despised for their repressive and abusive policing style and were considered by residents as an occupying force. During the chaotic final year of Aristide, the gangs, whom he had armed, ran the remaining police out of Cité Soleil, destroyed the one police station, and declared the zone under their control.

Physical layout and demographics of Cité Soleil played a central role in shaping contemporary urban violence. Cité Soleil grew without planning or government services as a huge population shifted from the impoverished countryside to the capital, increasing the urban population by 30 percent (nearly 1 million)

in just 10 years. The poorest and most desperate migrants ended in Cité Soleil, a vacant swampland without value, but close to Haiti's only industrial zone. Due to chaos, instability, and international sanctions, Haiti suffered a 40 percent loss of per capita gross domestic product from 1995 to 2005, making the poor even poorer just as the state became less and less able to provide basic services.

This unstoppable population growth made Cité Soleil the third largest city in the country when Aristide granted it autonomy from Port-au-Prince in 2003. Haiti's Cité Soleil was the equivalent of Chicago for the United States—but a Chicago without government presence and virtually ungovernable, ruled by criminal organizations. A city where average income was under a dollar a day, there was little public water, few paved roads, and no electricity; moreover, gangs controlled access and walked the streets visibly armed. There was one public school and one public high school for the 75,000 children. Few teachers would work there.

Poor people live all over Haiti, of course. But Cité Soleil's strategic location was a threat to national integrity. A U.S. military study called it "decisive terrain,"[3] bordering Haiti's only industrial zone and international seaport, straddling the main north-south road out of the capital, and within walking distance to the international airport and the national palace. The gang leaders repeatedly demonstrated that they could mobilize mobs on short notice to loot nearby factories not paying them off, or march downtown to protest (and loot) for the political issue of the day.

Complex Systems Theory

To understand the stabilization focus on gangs and the areas they control, it is important to recognize that gangs are not strictly a "criminal" problem in Haiti. For gangs, it was never only about making easy money; Haiti has a long tradition of powerful political elites deploying unofficial paramilitary adjuncts to control the population and wage armed actions against other political groups. From the *Tonton Macoutes*, armed thugs of the François Duvalier and son Jean-Claude Duvalier dictatorships, to the self-named *attaches* of the right-wing military after the fall of the Duvalier family, up to the *chimères* (that is, gang members) who were a manifestation of Aristide's willingness to use illegitimate force to remain in power, informal armed groups play a strong role in Haitian political ambitions.

Even with Aristide gone, there were regular rumors about competing political entrepreneurs financing one or another gang for illicit activities (including targeted kidnappings or "rent-a-riot" options), and keeping them on a string for the next election cycle. When tied (albeit loosely) to a political movement, gang members could think of themselves as legitimate "soldiers" rather than simply criminals. Even better, they would be able to represent themselves that way to their fellow slum dwellers.

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One way to consider the challenge facing the international community in Haiti is to look at the gang issue through the lens of system of complex systems theory. In Haiti, as elsewhere, gangs are self-organizing units that are self-supporting, grow if unopposed, and operate especially well within the permissive environment of a weak state. As with any complex system of systems, the gangs operate within some basic rule sets: they are "violence entrepreneurs,"[4] taking advantage of a situation to make money,
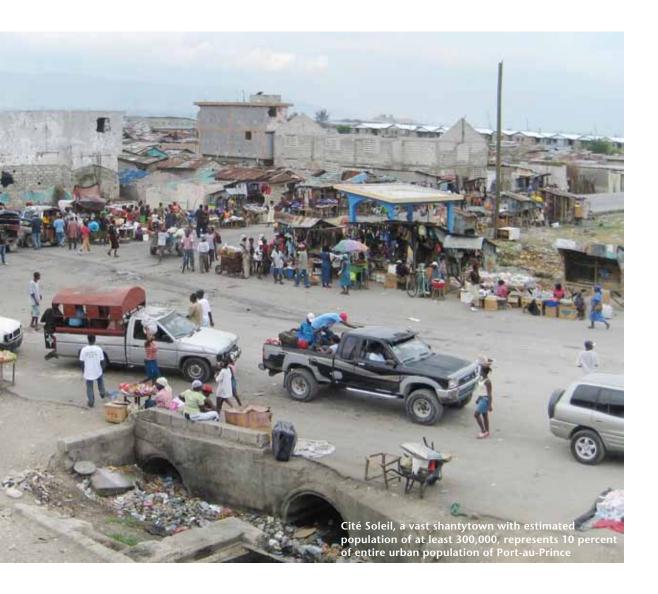
Laurence Kent Jones

gain power through that process, and gain more adherents. Adherents could even include political benefactors who recognize their ability to "get out the vote" or get others not to vote.

The evolutionary trajectory of gangs in Haiti followed a relatively linear progression. Gangs needed to defend turf from others, so they could operate with impunity. Once well established in a zone, they had a base for even greater activity, especially kidnapping. Groups consolidated their authority easily since they met strong needs for a social support network for those who were members, something important in the context of Cité Soleil. There were few alternatives to gang membership for unemployed youth. Those who joined the gangs were in many senses the most motivated; they were the risk-taking entrepreneurs of their generation. Although there were losses, there were still more recruits.

Beyond the basic rules, they operated inside more interconnected and varied networks. The

Cité Soleil, a vast shantytown with estimated population of at least 300,000, represents 10 percent of entire urban population of Port-au-Prince

gangs had much support from the population, at least at first—locals saw them as defenders of the population from a government that provided no services except abusive police. They were a local recourse for swift justice, although they were also brutal in their dispensation of justice. Not unlike such groups in Brazil, Jamaica, or Trinidad, the gangs actually supported a number of basic social services: food distribution by certain nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) was seen as tied to their

influence and permission, and they sometimes handed out funds or food directly. Indeed, gang membership provided benefits and upward mobility where such possibilities were scarce.

The gangs were not sophisticated and far-reaching "third generation" gangs such as Colombian drug lords or Jamaican "posses" that operate illicit networks across several countries.[5] They were at best "second generation" gangs—established nationally, but not internationally. They were ruthless, but also closely tied to their

community—preoccupation with turf was an indicator of the importance of community. At the same time, their strength (or acceptance by the population) in Cité Soleil was indirectly due to the fact that compared even to other slums around Port-au-Prince, the population in Cité Soleil was more transient. HSI surveys revealed that a large proportion of the population had lived there for only 5 to 6 years. If one had the means, one moved out. But other slum neighborhoods such as Bel Air had generations of poor who stayed in the same neighborhood. Even Martissant, another famous gang neighborhood, had clear middle-class roots and an educated population mixed in with urban poor. Turnover in Cité Soleil meant societal norms were not clearly defined. It was the Wild West of Haiti.

because there were few if any educated people in Cité Soleil, there was little contact with the rest of society

By 2004, Cité Soleil had become quite isolated. Being from Cité Soleil carried a stigma: the assumption was that a resident was a gang member, or at least a supporter. Because there were few if any educated people in the slum, and only the most micro of small businesses, there was little contact with the rest of society through other economic or social channels except handouts and unskilled pickup labor. This made it easier for comparatively young (but relatively well financed) gang leaders to establish and maintain their dominance. The gangs were still part of the larger fabric of Cité Soleil, however, and many members had family in the neighborhood. Local residents often tapped these gang disciples for loans or handouts, and some gang chiefs played the "Godfather" role to

the hilt. Other members were orphans or virtually orphans, and Cité Soleil was the only home they knew. There were complex interlocking systems of communication (no rumors travel faster than in Cité Soleil), trust, and (self-reinforcing) benefit connecting all aspects of life in Cité Soleil. The youth were both members of gangs and of Cité Soleil.

Confronting Gang Networks

In 2004 and 2005, when the gangs began kidnapping business leaders and political leaders (rumors suggested some were targeted for their political beliefs, not just their money), there was an increasing outcry for a public response. In 2006, when they began kidnapping schoolchildren and wives from the best neighborhoods in Port-au-Prince and stashing the victims in safe houses in Cité Soleil, the pressure for action became intense. With continued failure of negotiations for the gangs to turn in their weapons, President René Preval authorized UN peacekeeping forces to take more vigorous action.

Learning from an early series of unsuccessful raids that resulted in civilian casualties in 2004 and 2005, MINUSTAH planned an operation in late 2006 jointly with the partly reconstituted Haitian National Police (HNP). Following a series of sharp urban firefights, UN forces (led by Brazilian contingents) moved into Cité Soleil and established permanent posts in and around the municipality. With regular patrols, some gang leaders were killed or arrested. The situation facing the United Nations at the end of 2006 was not unlike that facing any large hierarchical force that is targeting a loose coalition of independently financed urban guerrilla groups. The parallels with Sadr City or Fallujah are obvious: small, loosely organized groups able to swarm a target and hide among the population quickly have the advantage.

As of mid-2007, there were still 300 to 600 gang members in Cité Soleil, operating underground with support and protection of some residents, or at least everyone's tacit silence. UN patrols were present, but Brazilian soldiers did not speak adequate Creole, nor would anyone have talked to them if they did. Things were still tense, and there was little or no economic activity on the street—even the ubiquitous Haitian "tap-tap" buses did not enter Cité Soleil for fear of robbery or worse.

The gangs were not even interested in opposing the UN directly, so they had little reason to expose themselves to a military reaction. They were operating outside Cité Soleil through robbery and kidnapping, extortion, and other activities while using Cité Soleil as a safe base. The UN and police could not be everywhere at once protecting everybody in an urban zone of 3 million, yet gang impunity made both the UN and the government look weak, spawning rumors among the population of special influences and arrangements. Police *were* very weak, with few officers, little mobility, and little experience. The United Nations was hampered by lack of training, proper equipment, and a mandate that gave them no arrest or police investigative authority.

UN and government attempts to control gangs came apart because of one key problem: the gangs were not a single organization. There were multiple small groups, representing different neighborhoods inside Cité Soleil. Each group was capable of allying itself with any other group, but the usual state was wary peace or else turf battles between different gangs inside Cité Soleil, except when united facing a larger UN force. When the UN moved in aggressively, they hurt some gangs but left others virtually untouched. The remainder simply moved into the new spaces available. Shifting leadership was often hard to pin down, and as groups were self-funded, it was impossible

to cut supply lines. After initial firefights, gangs quickly learned to avoid head-to-head confrontations with UN forces; they could continue their criminal activities with minimal interruption by merely staying out of the way of the larger but slower forces. They faded into the population. They knew the alleys and narrow streets far better than UN forces; they lived there, and the UN forces were on a 6-month rotation.

This cat-and-mouse game between the UN and gangs could go on for years. If the gangs were good at it (and they showed signs of innovation and adaptation), they would look better and better in the eyes of the community until the UN simply gave up, or the government fell from its own weight and incompetence. To an outside observer, this was a classic guerrilla versus occupation force problem from counterinsurgency theory, but with guerrilla tactics applied by a criminal insurgency. Looked at through a systems theory lens, this was a dynamic environment with constantly shifting social connections that the UN simply did not have a way to substantially affect with the limited budget and personnel assigned. The Haitian government was doing no better.

Another facet of this complex problem related to the legal challenges associated with catching and holding a suspect. As this was not a combat situation, minimum force was required, and when arrests were made authorities needed some standard of proof that arrestees had committed a crime. One possibility was to be caught in the act of committing a crime—something extremely difficult for Brazilian UN patrols to accomplish. In the limited circumstances of Haitian justice, there was no ability to collect or use forensic evidence. Grounds for arrest meant that someone had to file a complaint, identify his attacker, and agree to testify in court—a potential death sentence for a witness. Worse, complaints against gang leaders were lost or

charges dropped for reasons never explained (but assumed by the public to be nefarious).

Neither was the UN particularly popular nor trusted by local residents. They were seen as an occupying power, and with inevitable civilian casualties during firefights in narrow sheet metal shack alleys, there was a lot of resentment. Many presumed the raids conducted were intended to target civilians in an attempt to undermine support for President Aristide's party, *Fanmi Lavalas*, which was particularly strong among urban poor and strongest in Cité Soleil.

Although Brazilian forces had done the first step in the classic counterinsurgency strategy of "clear-hold-build," they had a problem. The Haitian state was simply not ready to work on the "hold" or the "build" steps. The police in particular were not interested in returning to Cité Soleil. Now that the Brazilians had taken over the zone, the police attitude was that they could keep it. From a police perspective, there were far too few police anyway, and other parts of Port-au-Prince needed them more. Staying out was better than trying to keep a lid on a dangerous slum inhabited by residents who had killed police in the past and supported gangs. Besides, there was no defensible police station in Cité Soleil, and police leaders insisted that several stations (that is, forts) would have to be built. Exposing the few police to daily risk and the threat of being overrun was not worth it in the eyes of HNP leadership. International NGOs and donors were not far behind in their estimates that the situation was still too dangerous to justify more funding and risk implementation staff. Civilian ministries were blunter: no police in Cité Soleil, no civilian staff even for visits (and even then, maybe not).

The Brazilian force commander, General Santos Cruz, described the Cité Soleil situation to HSI staff in an August 2007 meeting:

"We are sitting on a boiling kettle, unable to get off the lid. We need to do something different before it all blows up again." He stated his extreme disappointment that development organizations had not come in behind the Brazilian forces in February to change the dynamic in the community.

Stabilization Versus Development

Given the lack of state support and even international support for stabilization efforts in Cité Soleil, HSI approached the gang problem from a different angle. *Stabilization*, as we defined it, was not development. Making people richer or healthier would not necessarily improve the short- to medium-term situation. Indeed, such objectives—while important—were simply not feasible in the prevailing climate of insecurity. Gang members would still be dominant, and they were unlikely to be bought off with a new health clinic. Instead, HSI would use whatever tools were available to change the social dynamic in the community in such a way that the first programs would support each other and not rely on state or international assistance, which might be a long time coming.

Of course, over the longer term, we were in Cité Soleil to calm the situation enough that regular government services could be provided and the usual myriad NGOs and international funding would provide development programs already funded elsewhere in the country, but not in Cité Soleil due to the risk. For perspective, in late 2007, HSI calculated USAID was spending about $18 per capita per year on assistance in Haiti, but virtually nothing for the 3 percent of the Haitian national population in Cité Soleil. Other donor portfolios looked similar. (In the end, HSI spent about $22 per capita per year over 3 years, only 20 percent more per person) HSI would have to change the situation before the money would flow.

Netwar: Network Versus Network

Rather than deal directly with the gang leaders as equals or legitimate stakeholders, or use more force to take them out, the HSI approach was to marginalize gangs.[6] HSI would co-opt the community by building local groups dedicated to positive ends, empowering popular informal local leaders who were not beholden to gang leaders or political patrons. This would indirectly peel away the gang support base and leave gang leaders more exposed to possible police responses. Gangs were strong because they were organized, small, flexible, and numerous. We would fight fire with fire by building a network of networks that would undermine or recruit from their networks.

We were clear about our goals within the large development community in Haiti. We were not a development project. We were there to change the community from within, not by creating an objective needs-based assessment of the obvious and numerous problems of poverty, but by using our various activities to weaken violence entrepreneurs and empower social entrepreneurs. We were using development tools, but for stabilization purposes. Within Cité Soleil, we were admittedly not explicit about our goal of marginalizing gang leaders (and implicitly setting them up for arrest), but we never hid our intention to build a social network that would do more for Cité Soleil than gangs ever could. This was in effect a (somewhat discreet) political intervention to tilt the system in favor of some and against other actors.

The program was an integrated effort to shape the environment and rules of the game in the community.[7] Although HSI had multiple facets—large infrastructure projects, workforce training, support for private investment, or rule of law and governance aspects—perhaps the most crucial part of the anti-gang effort was a program of small grants offered via a USAID contract to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Working through IOM, we offered small projects in Cité Soleil to improve neighborhoods. We did not specify what kind of project, although it did have to be relatively inexpensive and simple.

We worked through IOM because there were no government ministries with either the personnel or will to take the risks entailed in working in the community. IOM had established good contacts in the community while working in 2005 in Cité Soleil with a USAID bureau, the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI). OTI had funded 20 projects through a similar procedure, but funding had ended, and later crime and violence spiraled out of control. With the advent of UN forces, there was space to risk something again. This time we would combine a critical mass of projects, rather than a single faceted effort, and integrate police assistance as well.

Learning the Lessons of Community Counterinsurgency

HSI was sometimes controversial. We were admittedly putting the population at risk with our offers of assistance. We were offering an opportunity for virtually anyone to come forward and propose a project. For funding approval, they had to hold a large and public meeting with neighbors to decide what project was needed, and then organize the neighbors to do the labor. Retaliation by a gang leader for usurping his power or turf was always a potential response.

To sweeten the deal and overcome some objections and risks, HSI paid labor from the community, so projects served to inject funds into the community quickly, proving that reaching out and cooperating with outsiders paid off. Approval was fast, less than 30 days, and contracting and hiring was done quickly. However, someone had to stand up and offer to

serve on a steering committee. By doing so, he was raising his profile inside Cité Soleil.

Participation was voluntary, and residents had to make their own estimates of the personal risk. However, quick turnaround meant that they could be delivering jobs and a neighborhood improvement in 30 days, an expedited time span when compared to most NGOs or the government, which would still be passing around the original proposal. This was for small and local areas at first—1 or 2 blocks, 100 to 200 inhabitants. People knew their neighbors, and knew who could be trusted. They also knew who had gang affiliations, and rarely did IOM have to worry about gang infiltration of a steering committee. In any case, we had no objection to gang members laboring on projects alongside the community, as long as there was no special treatment.

Growth was natural, not forced by timelines or output objectives. There was a positive feedback loop built into this small and local approach. If one neighborhood took the leap and tried a project, soon nearby volunteers would organize and request one for their neighborhood too. As word spread, more and more groups approached IOM for funding, to the point that we had to become somewhat selective in not funding too many projects in one small area, although we did discreetly favor projects in areas where there was still known gang dominance. We explicitly rewarded success. If a project went well, we offered funding for a second project. If it went badly (corruption, gang extortion), we were perfectly willing to drop the project and fund something in another neighborhood.

Local selection of development projects was essential. There are clear health, education, nutrition, and other needs in Cité Soleil. Any normal professional development program starts with a survey of needs based on evidence of malnutrition, illiteracy, unemployment, and so forth. As stabilizers, we found those needs irrelevant, and resisted outside groups advocating spending money on specific areas or sectors. The community decision process was what was important: the process was more important than what residents selected. In a slum dominated by gangs, there was a need for inhabitants to begin to take charge of their own lives, and getting together in a meeting and hashing out priorities and selecting informal leaders was crucial.

At one point after about the first 75 small projects had been administered, HSI came in for considerable criticism from some residents of Cité Soleil, as well as some organizations from outside, because we were "wasting" all our funds doing no more than paving every alley and mud street in Cité Soleil, neglecting other aspects that were more important. The observers were quite right; 80 percent of the funds *were* going to small road construction. What was not clear to outsiders was the significance of pavement to these extremely poor communities.

First, a cement paving stone project was extremely labor intensive compared to other choices, providing the maximum employment to the neighborhood and injecting cash into the extremely depressed community. Second, every road had engineer-designed drainage included. Cité Soleil had developed on a garbage-filled flood plain, so proper drainage was valuable. Third, most of the residents lived in shacks that were smaller than an American SUV. According to surveys, the average family size in Cité Soleil was six people. In those conditions, residents do not live inside their shack; they merely sleep there. We were paving living rooms and kitchens as much as we were paving roads. Fourth, with a decent space in front of each house, women immediately used their wages to set up businesses, selling everything

Newly paved streets in Cité Soleil allowed food vendors to open or reopen businesses

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from charcoal to fruit, often restarting businesses long abandoned due to instability. Fifth and most subtly, by building well drained common areas for slum blocks, the projects naturally increased community cohesion, not only through the joint building effort but also because everyone was now outside their homes watching out for everyone else. In other words, while inappropriate from a developmental perspective, small road projects were perfect from a stabilization perspective, creating another positive feedback loop.

Repeatedly, the local choice proved to be the right choice.

This was the beginning of our "swarm the gangs" strategy: building active groups to change the dynamic on the street. As more communities started coming for projects, and more groups began returning for a second tranche, another phenomenon developed: Local informal leaders began to talk to the new grassroots leaders who were working on projects a block or two or three away. In a slum torn apart by gang rivalries, where crossing the wrong street could end in murder, this was significant. IOM encouraged exchanges by offering group leadership training sessions, or suggesting meetings to discuss larger issues, inviting contacts from the now 20 to 30 groups. As representatives discovered common agendas, they became emboldened, and eventually began to touch on the need for police presence in the community. At the same time, various local representatives, with the tacit support of their neighborhoods, began to provide information to the United Nations about the activities of the gang leaders, leading to some arrests. None of this was explicitly pushed or forced by HSI; everything developed

as an integral part of the overall development of groups who naturally tended to be antithetical to the gangs.

At the same time this was developing, HSI was reinforcing the police, following an agreed-upon plan with police and UN leadership. Funding construction of a large, defensible—even imposing—police station was a slow contracting process through the State Department. (We did hire locals for construction labor, however, giving successful teams from small projects a shot at something bigger.) Fortunately, the UN Civil Affairs unit contributed $25,000 to rehabilitate a corner of the building that UN forces had occupied to convert it into a small police post inside the UN base. Despite concerns, 25 apprehensive police moved in, mostly because the local commander realized long before the national leadership that the community was ready to support police. Emphasizing a "community policing" model, HSI-funded contractors worked with HNP to develop a "Haitianized" national academy curriculum and training program. Community policing, as practiced in the United States, emphasizes police working with community groups to come up with answers together to problems that plague that community. HSI, through the State Department contract with DynCorp, funded one or two experienced U.S. police mentors who worked with the small unit every day on aspects of basic policing (some of the police had never attended the academy) and aspects of community policing. (Supporting our bias toward local solutions, we found mentoring in the station was more effective than formal training in the academy.)

With the advent of local community groups who were interested in cleaning up Cité Soleil and a police unit (no matter how undermanned) that was receptive, there were tremendous opportunities for synergy.[8] Combined with this was the work that we did supporting local justice efforts: rebuilding the destroyed offices of the local justices, providing training and equipment, and installing a case monitoring ledger system that provided accountability for judicial decisions. Part of our success was that we were not trying to solve every part of the legal mess that was the Haitian judicial system; we were merely working at the most local level to improve responsiveness to the public.

As with all strong networks, this was self-reinforcing; as each successful project built more cohesion and improved living conditions, the gangs began to seem like hindrances or outliers. The norms of the community changed. Our surveys from the period show that police were considered one of the best public institutions, even though there were only 25 in Cité Soleil, and (at first) they rarely patrolled unless accompanied by UN forces. The UN force image improved, but the clear preference in focus groups and surveys was for "our police" to come back in force.

Our greatest challenge was to come up with more police officers for the 300,000 population of Cité Soleil—eventually, following the HNP plan for construction, HSI built new police stations in Cité Soleil with a capacity of 200 to 250 officers, but HNP assigned only 25 to 35 officers (about 10 active per 12-hour shift). The full complement of 250 would provide a ratio of about 1 officer per 1,000 citizens, no higher than the rest of Haiti. Toward the end of 2009, an additional 50 arrived, but they were removed again shortly after the earthquake on January 12, 2010. Unfortunately, this police pullout coincided with the sudden infiltration of an estimated 300 escaped prisoners from the damaged national prison, most of them gang members picked up in the previous 3 years of efforts.

After the Earthquake

Surprisingly, while crime and violence are certainly up since the earthquake, things are not nearly as bad as might be expected from the influx of gang members and general destruction, by all reports.[9] (All projects constructed by HSI were undamaged by the quake, testament to the IOM technical assistance.) Even in the face of such a tremendous shock, there appears to be resilience in this new community of communities. Other neighborhoods and displaced camps have suffered more from gang violence and rapes. At the same time, private investment in the area (encouraged by HSI's infrastructure investments and by the changes in the community leading to improved security) has continued post-earthquake, with a recent $59 million power plant finished on one edge of Cité Soleil[10] and a new $25 million industrial park under construction on another edge. There should be 25,000 new jobs in Cité Soleil in a few years, which was always our best exit strategy. Beyond that, community leaders created a community forum made up of a great number of different organizations representing a broad swath of the population (with some indirect assistance from HSI working through a Haitian NGO, the Interuniversity Institute for Research and Development). It continues to operate, another key success story. Small community projects represented only about 25 percent of the total funding, but if we were to start over we would recommend even more money in a small-projects pot and less in other parts of the overall program.

Different from Standard Theory?

Much of this self-reinforcing network of networks system commentary would be recognized by any development expert versed in community-led development. This program was specifically aimed at dealing with the dynamic of violence and criminal domination, using a community-led approach to tamp it down, not simply come in after the government has completely wrested control from an opponent. As stated, this was using development tools for stabilization purposes.

We were deliberately not fighting a criminal network with force, even targeted force; we took an indirect approach to gang violence. We were not even capable of protecting the population as much as counterinsurgency theory suggests is needed. There was really nothing stopping the gangs from making a deadly visit to any tin shack at night. Rather, we were simply offering (tough) choices to the population, letting them decide what was feasible and how to approach security problems. Later, police were able to carry out intelligence-driven arrests, but it was probably just as well that they were not there in the early stages before the community was willing to cooperate. They might have created more resentment than success, blundering around blind.

What the continual policing shortage did prove was how far one can go with a stabilization strategy even without a major police presence. By the end of 2009, 18 months into the program, the police were reporting that crime rates in Cité Soleil were lower than some other areas of the city. Ironically, this good news made it harder to lobby for more police. The Catch-22 response was that more police were obviously not needed. UN forces were important, but the key was strengthening local community. The head of HNP police operations summed it up when he admitted to a visiting delegation in October 2009 that their greatest mistake was assuming that all citizens of Cité Soleil supported the gangs.

There were many threats on the lives of the community representatives, but none consummated. We would not have been surprised at

killings, but again, the program was voluntary. We presumed that attacks would be damaging, but not disastrous. If the leaders/representatives were willing to assume risks, we were willing to back their funding requests. We were not there to decide for others what was safe or not safe, and we pushed the envelope only as far as locals wanted. Multiple projects built resilience into the system in case of threats or violence. As noted earlier, we were there to build a critical mass that could continue regardless of counter-efforts.

Quickness was its own reward. Most community-led development programs spend a great deal of time creating a council or electing the right representatives, teaching how to run a project and manage a budget before

> **development efforts are at the mercy of those who control the locals**

funding anything. While we would have liked to spend more time on this process, we needed to build credibility quickly in the unpredictable environment. It was more important to show that something was happening in order to justify the risk taken by the community in working with outsiders. Project selection and local buy-in through a community meeting was key; less important was working out the details and training. Instead of many community meetings and training sessions, only one or two took place before the individual project decision. Over time, as things stabilized, IOM spent more effort training and encouraging local efforts to the point of creating skilled job crews employed by other construction operations in the area. However, early on, speed was the need.

Another difference was HSI willingness to walk away from a failing project. Most development efforts become invested in the success of

each community. They cannot admit failure, or they do not want to give up on the locals. Of course, that means that development efforts are at the mercy of those who control the locals. By spreading our projects throughout the area with many different groups, we did not become overinvested in any single site. We approached each small project as a contract—we would fund it, they would defend it. Not from actual gunfire of course, but from extortion and corruption. If the contractor providing technical skills was threatened, or supplies stolen, or other problems developed, we would consult with leaders and locals, explain that this could not continue, and discuss solutions. If it did continue, we pulled the funds and continued work in other areas. Usually within a week or two, IOM would be asked back to a community meeting to hear that the problem had been resolved. This happened only a few times, but we planned for more. Proving we could walk away reinforced local accountability and attention to detail across many neighboring projects, once they heard the story.

Thus, our small group rule set matched or countered many of the gang rule sets. Our network began to undermine their network. The system of systems began to tilt in a different direction. There was an inevitability about the process once it was launched. Threatening the projects would bring payback on the gangs, yet allowing the groups to continue always led to the gangs losing influence and support from the community. As the groups grew in number, they grew in strength and in their willingness to work with the government. As it turned out, the gangs were a part of the community, and responded to community cues.

Can This Work Elsewhere?

This approach is not a panacea. Small projects alone are not a complete strategy for

counterinsurgency, fighting criminal gangs, or rebuilding governments. They are, however, a tool for situations that are perhaps far riskier than expected, in a gray area where military operations may be needed still, but before any real government services appear. Without UN forces this might not have worked at all. However, to make stabilization stick, a program like HSI is needed that pulls observers off the fence.

HSI was political, time-bound, and experimental. We could not have done it using normal U.S. aid channels. Effectively, it required that money not be stovepiped and divided up before arrival in country, something that is virtually impossible to do in today's U.S. funding environment. We had to mix and match security and development funding constantly across multiple, different agencies, another task that is always tough and almost impossible to do without dedicated staff. We did not look at "real needs" and almost entirely focused on local priorities, no matter how seemingly unwarranted. Most development agencies do not have the freedom to ignore objective requirements and timelines in favor of something vaguely defined. Even the Commander's Emergency Response Program used in Iraq and Afghanistan suffers from (sometimes self-imposed) requirements to spend money quickly in order to get more money, using units present for only a short while looking for instant "leaders" with which to work, and often founders on the distinction between community-constructed projects and community-*led* projects.

The HSI model presumes the guerrilla or criminal insurgent force is somewhat reliant on local tolerance to remain camouflaged in the population. A small terrorist organization, for instance, operates in small cells and so deep underground that it needs little popular support to survive. We were also fortunate that gangs never developed an ideology beyond support for Aristide. They had nascent ties to international drug trafficking organizations, but did not have the opportunity to fully exploit those contacts for financial advantage. With ideology or outside financing, they would have been harder to undermine. Nevertheless, criminal organizations often rely on community tolerance for their activities, and even organizations as well funded and terroristic as Colombia's FARC depend on local support. Even if it looks impossible, a donor needs to make a "leap of faith" to allow locals to determine whether a program is viable. Offer the choice publicly, often, and loudly, but be sure it is a true choice where locals pick timing, location, project type, and approach. The locals will know best how to balance risks, and outside interests will neatly align with inside interests.

A temptation is to overload the project structure: when things are going well it seems easy to begin to try to be more directive, orienting this wonderful speed and energy into health or education or other things by adding incentives, subsidies, or just suggestions. Be careful, for the more directive the program becomes, the more legitimacy it loses in the population. Legitimacy (that is, *local support*) is the project's (and the locals') protection.

Another way to overload is to attempt projects that are simply too big or complex. And if the size of the grant increases too much, major efforts to steal funds might occur. Because the project is larger or more complex, theft will not be so obvious to locals or advisors. Projects must be small to be accountable. Better to do three small quick projects than one big long one, even if the community asks for a big one. Once the program is deeply invested, it is hostage to all sorts of manipulation. Keep it small and walk away if necessary.

HSI suffered from the weakness of the state, just as the UN mission did. The central government was interested in the project only for the first 6 to 9 months. Once kidnappings and insecurity dropped off the radar, so did Cité Soleil, HSI, and transition planning. Our funds were not enough to attract attention. We joked that we were victims of our own success. The lack of police, traceable back to many problems, including an inability to vet officers, purchase ammunition, and budget for salaries, meant that the HSI project did not fully meet its security sustainability goal and that the UN must continue to patrol. We had a strong government-agreed-upon HNP plan for police presence, but the HNP could not maintain the recruitment and training schedule. Finally, a magnitude 7.0 earthquake and a million homeless, oddly enough, will distract a government and affect planning.

Limited funding means keeping an eye on maintaining a critical mass of projects. Doing one or two is acceptable at the beginning, but the synergy comes from working across many different groups, at many different social and economic levels. Community observers who are still on the fence will begin to feel that change is passing them by. This is a necessary image. Thus, while not expensive, this program cannot be done on the cheap either. Do it well, or do not start.

Local government was a difficulty. At first glance, the program would seem to support local government. In Cité Soleil, however, the only interest was in controlling projects in order to divvy up resources to hire favorites and reward allies. This is not unusual in these situations. We had to avoid working with the local government at first—we simply wanted to get moving and prove the concept. In a more patient world, we would have waited out the officials and brought them along eventually. Later, HSI

became such a shining light that the mayor was supportive, but by then the population was virtually entirely opposed to the local administration. (Polarization of politics in Haiti has a long history.) We maintained our neutrality, which limited our ability to reinforce the population's ties to local government via the small projects, although that was our plan. We had to respect the desire of the local communities first. (USAID did have some separate efforts targeted on municipal administration.) Some of this elected versus informal leader conflict was overcome by the creation and growth of the Community Forum, which made a point of ensuring that the mayor or his representative were on the forum board and were invited to every meeting.

Some suggested the HSI transition strategy was undeveloped because the government did not pick up all services. However, success did not depend on the government suddenly arriving with a collection of social programs to assist in Cité Soleil. Haitian government is not capable of that even in the safest neighborhoods. Rather, we were aiming for at least regular police service, and an occasional school inspector visiting the private schools and reviewing teaching standards, or a functioning government health clinic with staff that felt safe enough to show up for work (this happened). More realistic for the medium term would be reputable internationally funded NGOs executing projects in Cité Soleil. (It is no accident Haiti is called "The Republic of NGOs.") Our real long-term exit strategy was private sector investment and the Community Forum. This mostly happened over the course of 3 years. The measure of transition that we most valued was survey data that showed inhabitants of Cité Soleil feeling better about their environment and their future—and that they were acting on this perception by joining groups, or

by successfully taking out micro loans, or doing other things that were impossible before.

HSI was closely tied to its environment; it was a political approach to network building. This meant a risk of elite capture, of a few somehow diverting project choices into personal benefits. In Cité Soleil, there were relative haves (those who earned $5 a day in a factory) among the mass of have-nots. We avoided some of that social conflict because we concentrated funds in a specific violent area and blanketed it. If we had tried to spread out over other neighborhoods, to do too much with too little, the risk of conflict over project choices would have been much higher. Yet we were at only about 20 percent more money than the United States already invested in other places.

We did receive criticism from parts of the city outside of Cité Soleil that they were not getting funding. We deflected some criticism and jealousy by pointing out that to get our kind of assistance, they had to do without police presence for years, be violently poor, stigmatized by the rest of the city, and do without the usual NGO assistance programs. However, as word spread of the success of the overall project, mayors from other towns as well as other slum neighborhoods began to ask for assistance along the same lines, rather than the sectoral needs-based assistance they usually got. That was the best kind of flattery.

Using This Approach

I can still remember the total disbelief of Haitians when they first heard of our program. They considered us either naïve or foolish to be working in an environment that for 20 years was famously nasty and brutish, and for 5 years was totally ungovernable. Outwardly, the small projects aspect was a recipe for gang extortion, or simply insignificant against the needs. To

outside critics, we appeared to have no plan; we were just going to throw money into Cité Soleil in the hope something would stick. It unnerved some to see random small projects as the centerpiece of a $20 million project. Selling the vision and gaining credibility was the first challenge.

The key was to find counterinsurgency theorist David Galula's "favorable minority" and reinforce them without accidentally killing them with our embrace. From a systems perspective the catch was designing a program that could deal with the different systems (social,

> **the important part was what the community was building while they were building the projects**

economic, and even psychological) working in Cité Soleil and, using incentives, nudge them into a different and positive feedback channel. How this worked provides lessons for counterinsurgency theorists as well as public security and social development experts.

There were many other linked and integrated aspects of HSI, and this article deals only with one. We constantly looked for ways to magnify our impact across any sector, from the smallest (summer school for children, but only if the community found matching funds) to the largest (convincing the Inter-American Development Bank and the Ministry of Transport, Communications, and Public Works to rebuild a seaport used by residents to bring in vegetables for the market). We were never the lead, yet always the lever.

Most important was the focus on supporting social entrepreneurs through flexible and speedy assistance so they could build networks of supporters and help reinforce and grow group

links and activities. We had the local population's adaptive ability and persistence working for us. All we had to do was stay flexible and more important, stay out of their way. The focus on projects was merely a means to an end—improving lives is only partly done by building water tanks, parks, roads, or drainage. The important part was what the community was building while they were building the projects. By facilitating choice to the community, we supported local action and local leaders despite the risks of retaliation, the linchpin that built successful resistance to violent elements in Cité Soleil. **PRISM**

Notes

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